

# BolivianExpress

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Magazine



*Fitaz* :  
BOLIVIA ON STAGE

**REVIEWS  
THEATRE IN BOLIVIA  
GHOSTS FROM THE PAST**

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# EDITORIAL

Theatre is ephemeral. Performance unravels, however spectacularly, within the parameters of particular hours and locations, and vanishes at the clap of an audience. What's left are traces of individual experiences: the play's script, the ghost of a memory, or reviews in magazines like this one. This transience is particularly heightened in Andean theatre traditions, where an initial script is often only a springboard for rehearsals, if the script even existed in the first place.

We know little about ancient Andean or Incan theatre, because it was passed down orally. The only play of which we have documentary evidence is *Apu Ollantay*, first published in 1857. The drama of an Incan royal family, it has not been established whether it was conceived by the Inca or Spaniards, or – the compromise interpretation – if it was Inca conceived and then adapted for Spanish performance in its script form. Nevertheless, colonial forces had an impact in the transcription and translation of the play into German and Spanish for wider audiences, which is the reason why we still know about *Apu Ollantay* today. Catherine Boyle, Latin American culture professor at Kings College London, points out that, conversely, modern Bolivian and Latin American theatre suffers the opposite problem: because it is not often recorded or translated it is 'invisible beyond performance', both within Latin America and the world at large. It has little possibility of entering a global canon or being reworked and performed by non-Bolivian theatre companies abroad.

This is why the FITAZ theatre festival is important. A play's script gives us access to the textual side alone, while a festival celebrates the true performance in all its glorious transience. Maritza Wilde, director of FITAZ, says she considers theatre to be 'one of the greatest instruments for communication, the coming together of different communities and their respective cultures'. If a theatre event communicates cultures of daily life, FITAZ, an international festival, converges cultures of performance. It allows Bolivian theatre to open itself up to the international scene, and with this issue of Bolivian Express, we extend its impact into printed memory. As a number of our reviewers this month point out, Bolivian theatre usually breaks the 'fourth wall', the traditional Western boundary between audience and stage. This is appropriate at a festival in which dramatic participation is as much about learning from foreign works as having the chance to share your own. At FITAZ, 'all the world's a stage': everyone is an actor as well as a spectator. Brief an event as it may be, it is a chance for Bolivian theatre to widen its influences and audience, hopefully leading to more international performances on the stages of our ephemeral world.

By Xenia Elsaesser

**N.B.** Several Spanish and Aymara words are marked in **bold** throughout this issue. Their meanings can be found in our glossary



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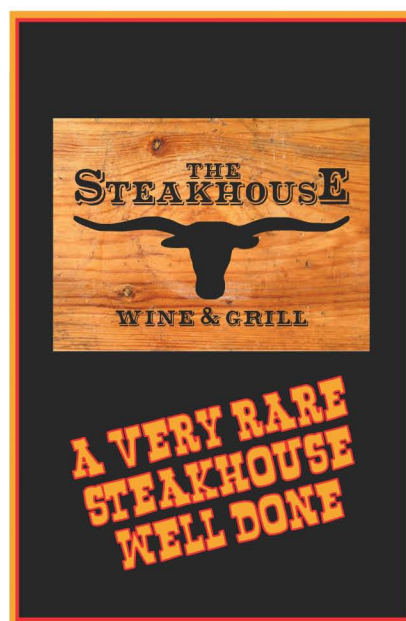
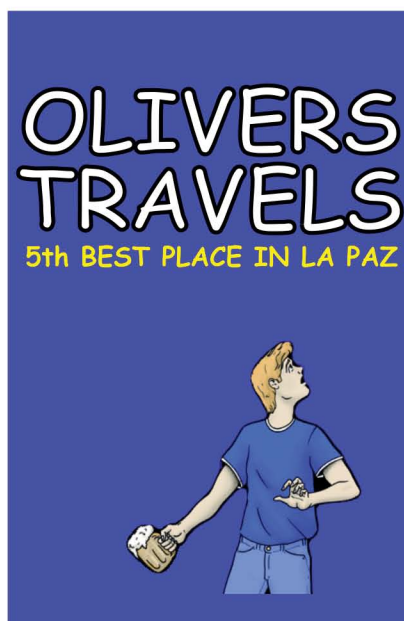
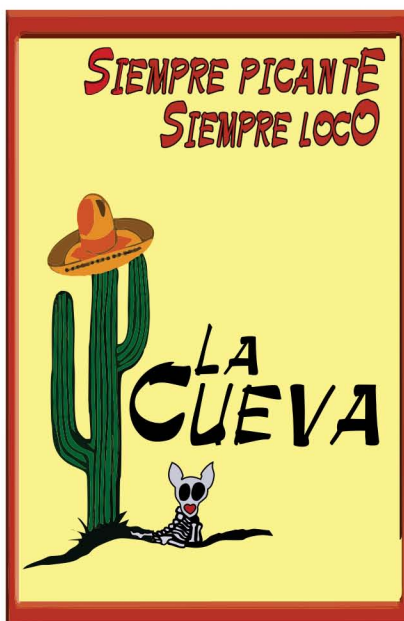
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# GLOSSARY

ALTIPLANO	The Andean high plateau surrounding La Paz
APARAPITA	A laborer who carries heavy objects on his back all day to earn a living, and is typically thought of as having no social life other than drinking at various bars at night
AYMARA	A Bolivian Andean indigenous group
CHUSPA	Colourful woven medicine bags
DIA DE TODOS LOS SANTOS	A Christian festival celebrated on 1st November, in South America, offerings (ofrendas) are given to the dead
CHOLITA	Bolivian indigenous women, typically dressed in bowler hats and long flowing skirts
PACHAMAMA	The Earth goddess, known in the West as Mother Nature
POLLERA	Long, flowing one-piece skirts, sometimes embroidered, sometimes worn by cholitas
TÍO UBICO	The ghost of a famous actor who used to work in El Teatro Municipal, affectionately known as Tío, meaning 'Uncle'
PACEÑO	A person from La Paz



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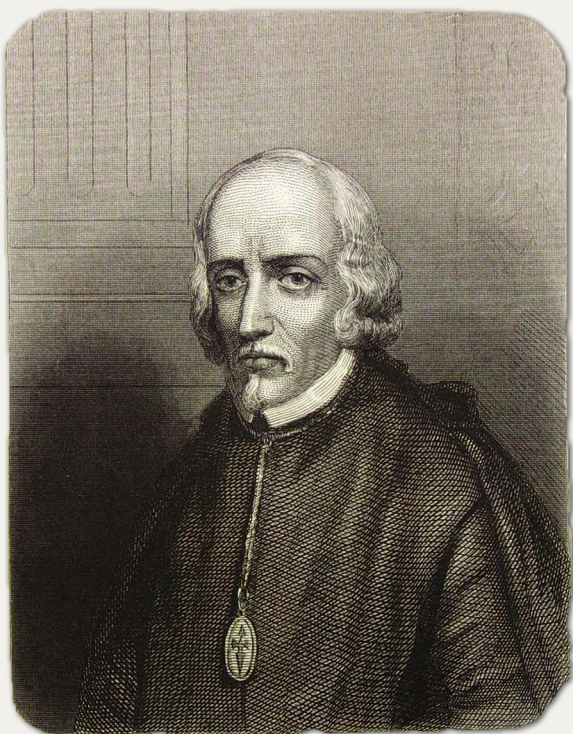
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# WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE

A History of Theatre  
in Bolivia

TEXT: DANNY REES

**T**

his year FITAZ broke with tradition and opened with a Bolivian play, going against the international element integral to the festival's identity. This innovation is symbolic of the growing

confidence which Bolivia has regarding its theatre. What, however, is Bolivia's history regarding the theatre?

Both before and after the Spanish conquest, theatre has been performed in this landlocked nation. However, a coherent tradition was somewhat lacking and traditional Spanish styles heavily influenced Bolivian theatre throughout the nineteenth century. How has this nation overcome its many problems in order to establish a theatrical heritage for its future generations?

Despite this lack of theatrical tradition, the plays performed during this year's FITAZ festival have been remarkably distinct and Bolivian. One reason for the underdeveloped theatrical tradition is Bolivia's imposing geography and relative isolation. Both communication and travel was, and to a certain extent still is, difficult in Bolivia, and so it was difficult to establish theatre companies. The Bolivian spirit of endurance has, however, overcome this seemingly insurmountable problem, and it has been incorporated into its theatre. With much of Bolivia's landscape being empty, a minimalist approach to both staging and direction has been created. The imposing and extravagant staging, characteristic of the West End and Broadway, often separates the audience from the play. However, the typically Bolivian staging includes the audience in the action,

representing both the country's geography and the breaking of the fourth wall, a typically modern, Western theatrical convention.

The **Aymaran** culture also influences Bolivia's theatre: with such heavy emphasis on nature and on an individual's symbiotic relationship with **Pachamama**, Bolivian theatre works from within a play, as director Diego Arambaro comments, 'The work creates itself' – it is both the creator and the created. This elevates Bolivian theatre onto its own **altiplano**, giving it a higher literary appreciation and also a distinctly Bolivian quality.

Despite the long-lasting political unrest that Bolivia has endured, its population often did not turn to theatre to express its sorrow or anger. During the War of the Pacific, in which Bolivia lost valuable land to Chile, including its access to the sea, the theatre did not reflect the political and social turmoil. However, as time has passed, Bolivia has become increasingly confident at using theatre as a vehicle for social and political expression and commentary. The War of the Chaco helped to unify the country in a quest for a national identity, and this time theatre played an integral role. Bolivians used the arts to create a new and distinct identity for themselves, with Antonio Díaz Villamil including the lively and expressive language of the lower classes, creating a more representative theatre. Again, working from within this national-identity crisis, Bolivians started to look at their problems and the theatre offered an invaluable avenue for expression and commentary: Raúl Salmón in the 1950s and 1960s wrote social plays with a didactic purpose. *Tres Generales* (*Three Generals*, 1969) puts three

presidents of the nineteenth century into contemporary Bolivia, faced with the quotidian problems of the everyday Bolivian citizen, highlighting the social and political problems as seen by the populace. The perspective of the average Bolivian contributed to the use of diverse and colourful everyday language, shying away from the stilted and elevated verse monologues of the preceding century. Guillermo Francovich urged for educational reform in *Como los Gansos* (*Like the Geese*, 1957), and the identity of the indigenous people became increasingly important for Bolivian playwrights and audiences alike. Arambaro comments that Greek tragedy is the purest and most intense form of drama, but it is too theatrical for Bolivians, as are the works of Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca (whose works are hardly ever performed on the continent). Instead, Bolivians seek a theatre that expresses who they are collectively, what challenges they face, and what problems they must overcome.

And what of its future? Despite weaknesses in funding and state support – no surprise in a country that's slowly lifting its way out of poverty – there is a newfound confidence and desire to explore creatively through the theatre, epitomized by the FITAZ festival. Additionally, Bolivia has a wellspring of indigenous culture that, combined with its tumultuous modern history, gives its creative class a rich vein of experience to mine. Now, with recent improvements in transportation, education, and an incipient but growing middle class, Bolivian theatre has an opportunity to develop in its own way; to produce domestically – and, through collaboration, internationally – a historically unique performance art.





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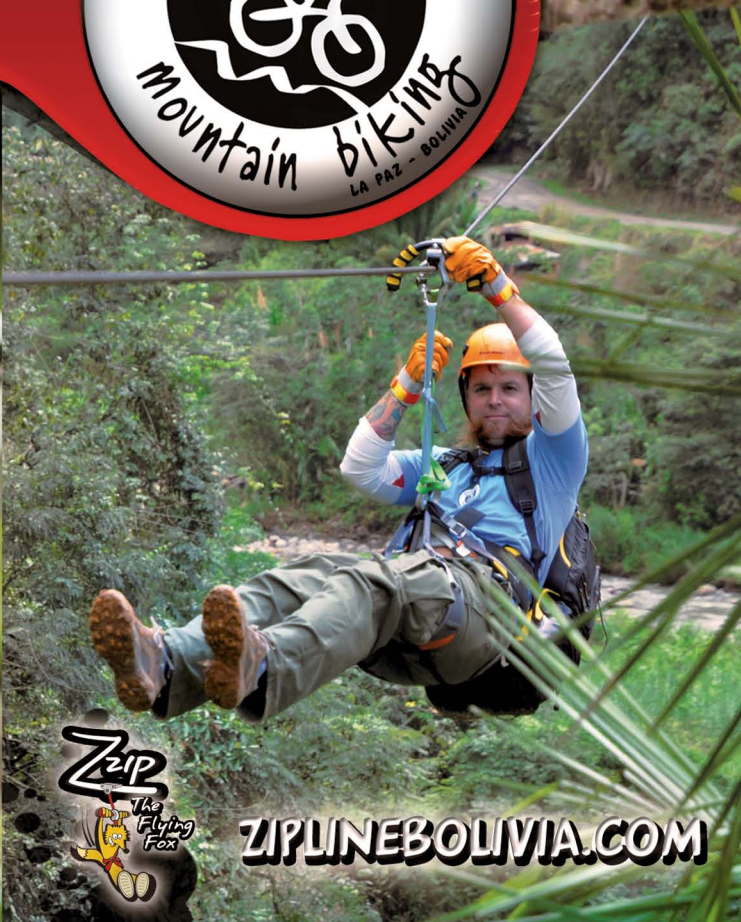


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The background of the entire page is a photograph of a window covered in condensation. Two hands are pressed against the glass, one on the left and one on the right, with fingers spread. The lighting is soft and diffused, creating a moody atmosphere.

# THE PHANTOM OF THE THEATRE.

TEXT: CARINA TUCKER

She found herself floating towards the stage; the music was too hard to resist... Her mind swam along with the undulating notes of the piano and her eyes searched for their author. There he was: a man dressed in black, his back turned to her as his hands glided across the keys. She couldn't see his

face, but the music he played was of transcendental beauty; she had to know the musician's name. She rushed outside to the ticket office where her friends were still working and asked who was playing that evening. They looked at each other and laughed. She insisted: 'He plays so beautifully – what is his name?' 'There aren't any musicians playing at the moment', they replied. 'It must have been some-

thing else...' 'But he's playing in the stage area'; she didn't understand. 'It must have been Tío Ubico', they at last confided to her. Her skin prickled with goosebumps and her hair stood on end. She was sure of it: she had just seen a ghost.

This is the story of Doña Inéz, an usherette working in La Paz's most famous and historical theatre, El Teatro Mu-





nicipal. It was on a cold Wednesday evening that I met with her, perched beside her and armed with my trusty tape recorder, hanging on to her every word. She was mesmerising. A small figure dressed head-to-toe in her navy blue theatre uniform, with a pair of thinly rimmed glasses perched on the end of her nose, she was the typical grandmother: softly spoken yet with a magic behind her eyes that told of tales and adventures yet to be shared. When I asked her what she had witnessed all those years ago, her gaze grew distant. There was a moment of silence as she took the time to let her mind rewind freely back to the night when her perception of reality had done a 360-degree turn and had left her reeling.

Three days after the surreal experience, the usherette had suffered from a continual fever. The fright had proved too much for her. After conversing with her friends, who had explained to her the more esoteric aspect of the theatre's history, she had carefully made her way back to the stage area where she had seen the man playing the piano. But the orchestra pit was empty: there was no one there. The piano, too, had disappeared. She only realised later that it would have been impossible for someone to have carried down a piano of that size: it would have required the strength of at least eight men. In the history of the theatre, there has not once been a piano in the orchestra pit. This realisation provoked her fever.

I had never before been a believer in ghosts, but Doña Inéz speaks to me with quietly assured confidence. There are no theatrics involved – her hands don't shake and her eyes don't roll when she speaks of the past. She is simply telling her story; she believes in it wholeheartedly, yet leaves the listener the freedom of choice to believe or not.

The event took place about eight years ago when she was working in the dressing rooms, of which she was then in charge. The 'hauntings' had been taking place in the theatre since the early 1900s yet, prior to the experience, Doña Inéz had been totally unaware of the reported sightings. She had never even heard of Tío Ubico. Her complete ignorance undeniably adds weight to her story: without previous knowledge, it would have been impossible for her to have projected the impression of a ghost onto her experience. She repeatedly assures me of how convinced she was that the music was emanating from the touch of a famous pianist. A pianist who was alive, not dead. Furthermore, it seems uncanny that her description of the ghost – a figure all in black, wearing a long tail-coat jacket and gentleman's

hat – could be so accurate a portrait of **Tío Ubico**.

Doña Inéz strikes me as a brave woman. She still works for the theatre, now acting as a theatre attendant for El Teatro de Camara which is situated in the adjoining building to El Teatro Municipal. Other theatre workers have not been as courageous. She tells me about a security guard who quit his job in shock after a visit from the phantom.

Although many have had differing experiences of him, it remains unclear who 'Tío Ubico' actually is. As corroborated by Doña Inéz, it is said in the world of theatre that ghosts are usually accompanied in their after-life by orchestras playing beautiful music in their wake. Indeed, despite not having been a renowned pianist whilst alive, it appeared that Tío Ubico was playing challenging classical music, possibly that of Beethoven. The story goes that Tío Ubico, as he is so fondly called nowadays, was originally Wenceslao Monroy, a talented actor who spent the majority of his life working within the theatre. At first, one of its most important lead actors, he digressed in later life to work in administration with odd jobs including that of doorman. It is said that he even came to the theatre when he was a young boy, a habit that led to his love of the theatre and all that relates to it. Rumour states that Monroy spent his last days as a beggar, asking for money outside the theatre doors. His family deny this, however, claiming that he remained at home until his death. The latter, moreover, is another point of contention in the life of Monroy. His family maintain that he died at home from an illness, whilst some members still working in the theatre – principally our story's usherette – believe that he died in the stage area from a heart-attack.

The mystery surrounding the figure has attracted many, causing a *Ghostbusters*-type team to go in and investigate. According to Doña Inéz, the group left empty-handed, although it is believed that a photo was taken in which it is possible to see a pair of ghostly hands playing a piano... When asked if anyone has been called in to rid the theatre of the ghostly presence, however, the theatre worker was firm in her answer: Why would they? Tío Ubico doesn't do any harm. He might scare you a little bit but he isn't vengeful. Bolivian tradition calls for a priest to come in and to bless the haunted space, but in this case there is absolutely no need. Tío Ubico is seen by the theatre-workers as a friendly presence – a sort of middle-aged Casper, if you like – who protects the theatre and acts as its guardian. According to

another staff-member, he only does things to those who go in with bad intentions. She mentions stories of people having been pushed over, left rolling across the floor without any reasonable explanation. As in the case of the *Ghostbusters*, she argues that Tío Ubico hides from those who search for him. He'll only appear to you if you don't expect anything from him.

Anecdotes of Tío Ubico tapping people on the shoulder or of cheekily slapping women's behinds are told as though relaying tales of a close family member – such is the relationship between the 'ghost' and the theatre's staff. He has been a part of the theatre ever since people can remember: there is no clear point in history where the two are self-existent. The theatre-workers are so used to him now that they see him as an integral part of daily life. As another staff-member puts it, though she was scared at first to see Tío Ubico, she is not frightened by him because she knows what and who he is. She is certain that there are two worlds: the world of human beings and the world of the soul and the spirit. She understands clearly that Tío Ubico is a presence – a soul who loved the theatre so much in his physical existence that he has remained there in his after-life.

She asserts that Tío Ubico is an 'emblematic personality' that acts as an auxiliary attraction of the theatre. For this staff-member, it is ridiculous to talk of him as a ghost: if he were one, then the theatre would be empty and abandoned, and this is not the case. To talk of 'ghosts' is to talk of horror stories and terror, of madness and lunatic asylums. This is far from the reality present within the theatre. There are no hauntings here. For those who love torch-lit tales of doors slamming and footsteps running this will come as quite a disappointment, but it is clear that Tío Ubico is more of a cheeky guardian angel who has got stuck on his way to Heaven, than a Peeves left in limbo with unfinished business.

From my discussions with Doña Inéz and her colleagues, one thing is clear to me: Wenceslao Monroy, aka Tío Ubico, is the 'essence of the theatre', and should be remembered as such. We may choose not to believe in the reality of ghosts, but we must believe in the metaphorical ghost of memory and passion. Tío Ubico is a bold reminder of the power of our souls to stay present – even beyond death – in what we love the most. And, let's face it, if you got stuck on Earth for decades more than you bargained for, who's to say that you wouldn't try and have a little fun whilst you're waiting too... I know I would.



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# FITAZ: A PHENOMENON FOR AN THEATRE

TEXT: LAUREN BELL  
PHOTO: CHRISTIAN CALDERÓN

Once every two years, theatre companies from around the world, including Brazil, Argentina, Chile, France and Spain, join Bolivian theatre groups to present the two-week-long International Festival of Theatre in La Paz, FITAZ. Everyone involved works with the common purpose of providing entertainment as well as creating a nurturing environment for discovery, development and advancement of the global art form of theatre. This year, the popularity of the festival was evident from the packed venues and queues of people waiting for rush tickets, in hope that some people wouldn't turn up for their reserved tickets. Without a doubt, this event holds significant importance for the essence of theatre in Bolivia.

So how exactly did FITAZ begin? The brain behind the initiative is Maritza Wilde, an actress and theatre director whose elegant gestures and body language reveal her past as a ballerina. Although originally seeking to become a professional dancer, theatre has been her love and passion for the majority of her years. Having studied in France and Spain and visited almost all of Latin America, she has formed many contacts and established many connections throughout the European and Latin American theatre communities. Whilst living in Spain in 1996, her colleagues inspired her to organise an international theatre festival in Bolivia, justifying the idea through her experience and how well networked she is. Despite being unsure of the idea to begin with, she decided only

a few days later to put the idea into action and host a festival in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, in the lowlands of eastern Bolivia. Little did Wilde know that this was to be the first of many festivals to follow and a significant step in the development of contemporary theatre in Bolivia.

After the success of the first FITAZ festival in Santa Cruz in 1997, Wilde was called upon to produce another in La Paz in 1999, as it seemed appropriate that Bolivia's cultural and historical capital have its own theatre festival – as well as the fact that Wilde lives here. This first year was difficult, especially on economic terms, but after a rocky start, FITAZ has gained a following, allowing it to be produced every two years. FITAZ has obtained the support of an increasing number of municipal institutions over the years, and, along with the positive reactions from the public and media, this has enabled the festival to become the success that it is today.

This year, the festival has seen more Bolivian plays than ever before, which has lent it a much more Bolivian focus. Over 30 national groups performed, attracting an even larger Bolivian crowd. It's worth noting that this year was the first that the festival actually opened with a Bolivian play. According to Wilde, there's no real reason behind this apart from it being worthwhile. However, the play has particular significance as it's from La Paz, and its playwright, Jaime Saenz, worked in theatre for many years and is one of the best-known novelists, poets and short story writers amongst **Paceños**, with his most famous piece of work being a

poem called 'The Night,' written just before his death in 1986.

So is FITAZ simply about entertaining the people of Bolivia? When asked about the purpose of the festival, Wilde replied with her thoughts that it holds the same objective that she believes the majority of other festivals have. She adds, 'It is a festival that I have created to contribute to, collaborate with, and develop Bolivian theatre.' At the same time, she believes that it is important that a cultural exchange takes place and that the Bolivian artists and young creators can have an interrelation with the others that come from other countries. However, according to Wilde, the most important part of theatre is the link between people and their culture, and it's essential that this connection be established. Ultimately, it is a means to reflect upon society and is therefore a learning curve and a process of discovery for everyone who participates.

For the eighth time running, FITAZ has proved to be a success, selling out the majority of performances; one wonders what more we can expect from the festival in the years that follow. Wilde enlightens us, stating that her aspirations for the future of FITAZ are to add many new creative and valuable features from other groups to the programme as well as expanding it to allow more performances from groups that currently cannot be accommodated. At the end of the day, she believes that the festival has to continue not only for La Paz but for the rest of the world. In the words of Maritza Wilde, it's all about 'continuing the path' of the festival and theatre in general so that both survive for centuries to come.



# EDUARDO CALLA

## AND THE FUTURE OF BOLIVIAN THEATRE

TEXT: HELENA CAVELL

As seen at the La Paz Fitaz festival, Bolivia enjoys a wealth of talented directors, writers, actors and actresses. Their abilities have been on display in various locations around the city and have largely captivated their audiences; for years, this festival has helped to inspire future generations of talent – be it acting, writing or directing, costume or stage design. However, as Eduardo Calla describes, today a noticeable lack of young raw talent paints a questionable future for Bolivia's theatrical sphere.

Eduardo Calla is one of Bolivia's most talented directors and writers. Aged 31, he is already well known as the co-founder of the production company Escena 163, formed in 2004. Productions such as *Buenas Influencias: Boni-*

*tos Cadáveres, Di Cosas Cosas Bien... (Oh my country is très jolie!),* and most recently, *Mátame Por Favor*, have enjoyed applause from audiences and critics alike. Compared with the wannabes of today, Calla had a relatively easy rise to success. Fortunate opportunities as a novice catapulted him into the writer and director that he is today, bypassing the proverbial starving artist phase which characterises many a young creative's fight for recognition. In 2000, he was made aware of a project called Tintas Frescas, an initiative created by the French government, in which Latin American countries were given the task of putting on a French play in France. Through this, he was made known to author and director Hubert Pescolas, who later selected Calla to undertake a period of residency in Marseilles, during which he wrote his first play, *Extaciones*. Calla

credits this time as his 'formation period': through the access he was given to many different styles of theatre, he was able to develop his own writing style. From here he returned to Bolivia and continued in the same vein, soon reaching the level of renown that he enjoys now.

But his good fortune is rare, and Callas is concerned at the dwindling numbers of emerging talent in Bolivia. 'It seems to me that right now there is a generational gap in theatre, where the youngest people working are around thirty years old.' Thirty may not seem old, but theatre is an industry that thrives on raw talent and needs aspiring youngsters to provide fresh perspectives. Calla's theory on why there are few hopefuls makes sense; 'there aren't any young people that are creating productions, because the reality is that people





need a job that allows them to make money. It's also because today's generation are much more pragmatic and less idealistic, and theatre is an idealistic vocation. For young people, it's practically impossible to start to work purely in theatre because they either have to start with a very conventional commercial production or they need to respond to the requirements of an institution that pay them for their work.'

This would suggest that for young people in Bolivia the difficulty of 'making it' lies not in competition, as is the case in many other countries, but in finding the confidence to dedicate themselves entirely to their craft. When scholarships and governmental assistance are not provided, very few people believe in their skill enough to leave regularly paid jobs behind and to rely solely on income from theatre. Even Calla, one

of Bolivia's success stories, is unable to do this, having two further separate sources of income on which he can depend if needs be. Nevertheless, the opportunities he had in his youth kick-started his career, giving him the confidence to progress to where he finds himself today. The question that provokes concern is why programmes like Tintas Frescas are no longer as readily provided for the next generation of talent. There is little chance for the industry to develop when very few resources are dedicated to the guiding and formation of fresh faces.

Ironically, however, Calla argues that this is where the unique distinction in Bolivian theatre lies. Lack of funding, either governmental or private, means that writers and directors have more freedom to experiment: 'Very few institutions support us...I think this gives our Bolivian

theatre the opportunity to take real risks, because when you don't answer to anybody except your own work, you have more chance to gamble artistically.' This seems to be the one advantage that comes from a lack of support for Bolivian theatre. Young people who manage to produce work are free to let their imaginations roam without restriction from sponsors. Their work is true innovation. As Calla says, Bolivia has no defining theatrical style, and this is largely due to the freedom that characterises it.

It seems that a balance is required: one that allows the creation of original theatre in Bolivia, yet also provides assistance to young amateurs that cannot afford to pursue their theatrical dreams. Calla's experience proves that the equilibrium can be found. Hopefully more stories like his will ensure the future success of Bolivian theatre.





# 30 GRADOS DE FRÍO

TEXT: CARINA TUCKER

★★★★☆ 4 out of 5 stars

**D**

irected by Luis Miguel Gonzalez Cruz, *30 Grados de Frio* premiered in La Paz on Wednesday, 28th March, in El Teatro Municipal. The play was a success, received with rapturous applause and standing ovations

on its close. It was performed by the Spanish collective El Astillero, which was brought together in 1993 by the writers Raul Hernandez, Juan Mayorga, Luis Miguel Gonzalez and Jose Ramon Fernandez. The four used the collective to perform both personal and external works before an audience, thus engaging the wider pub-

lic in a socio-theatrical discussion. In 1995, they were enriched by a surge in membership: new professionals in visual arts, acting and stage direction allowed them to become more boundary-pushing in these areas and make dramatic interpretation the focus of their work. The writing collective has been per-

forming for FITAZ since its creation eight years ago.

The play is based on *Cartas de Rusia*, by the famous 19th-century novelist Juan Valera. It tells of the relationship between the Duke of Osuna and Valera himself, the Duke's then-secretary: the pair travel to St. Petersburg together, undertaking what is a long – and, as we are repeatedly reminded, very cold – journey, studded with romance, betrayal and the odd moment of enlightenment. Far from being a dry historical drama, the play is a light comedy with the pair acting as a Hispanic Laurel and Hardy in an attempt to win the audience over by a laugh or three.

The play deals with their developing friendship as well as with their trials and tribulations concerning their diplomatic ties to the Russian aristocracy. Set in the winter of 1856, Gonzalez shows us two men who are completely out of their comfort zones in a classic culture-shock experience. This is epitomized by the highly comedic kissing scenes in which the Russian Duke plants full-on smackers on a less-than-pleased Duke of Osuna, who spends most of the play spitting this foreign saliva out across the stage.

It was impressive to observe how deftly the actors manipulated their surroundings, transforming the staging around them to create new scenes and new characters. The narrator, for example, morphs with ease into about five different people, ranging from a rather camp Italian chef to a demanding horse-and-carriage driver, who repeats in rather self-conscious asides, 'and all of this I'm saying in Russian', to an already enraptured audience. In the performance I attended the opening five minutes of the play were unfortunately tainted by about three trailer-perfect ringtones going off in succession – followed by the usual titling and exaggerated 'Ssshhs' from angered audience members. But the singular audacity of the actors soon dissipated the tension and swept us straight back to the windy Russian steppe.

The performance is charmingly unpretentious, with the actors changing scenes and dress right in front of us. The staging is classically minimal: a few chairs, a table and a couple of clothes railings for quick dress-changes. The intimacy of having just three actors on stage, none of which are ever allowed to rest backstage, means that the rapport between the audience and the characters is one

of increasing solidarity and trust. Their laughter becomes our laughter. Their endearing self-deprecation is a joy to watch as it succinctly shattered the false illusion that we must take ourselves (and life) seriously.

We become children again as we delight in back-to-basics physical theatre. The narrator makes onomatopoeic horse-hooves noises by tapping a wooden block in a decisively galloping rhythm; he shakes a series of supposedly wall-hung pictures in an effort to recreate the movement of the Spain-Russia train carriage. It is humour at its most slapstick but for light-hearted entertainment at the end of a busy working day, it is just what an audience wants.

As the play draws to a close, Valera sits atop the wooden table and speaks to us as though we were childhood friends. He reflects that 'this world is a dance', inviting us to enjoy what the present moment has to give us because we don't know what the future will hold. The play as a whole is a testimony to this: we are called to delight in what we see and experience around us – life as an ode to living freely. This freedom is released through the joy of laughter, and as shown by *30 Grados de Frio*, there is nothing more uplifting than laughing collectively.

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# HAMLET DE LOS ANDES

TEXT: DANNY REES

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ 1 out of 5 stars

**B**olivian director Diego Aramburo took on Shakespeare's classic *Hamlet* in a new collaboration with the Teatro de los Andes on March 27, with little success.

The fundamental problem lay between Aramburo's dark, morose style of direction and the theatre company's reputation as lighthearted, colourful and humorous – three things which *Hamlet* is not. Although Shakespearean tragedy can have funny moments, with such a reduced script (only 90 minutes long), the play failed to be either lighthearted or heart-wrenching. Although Aramburo said the performance was important for the Teatro de los Andes because the company was faced with the same existential problem as the protagonist – *To be or not to be*, a motivating force for the play's production – the fusing of the two styles was the play's downfall.

As the audience took to their seats, they were greeted by Hamlet's father's corpse laid out on a bleak and empty stage, and immediately a sombre tone was set. The main prop – a door that was also used as a table – was used extensively and creatively, allowing for the minimalist approach that characterises Aramburo's directorial style. The other props were metallic, which, combined with the spotlights, created the harsh and sinister mise en scène that Hamlet usually bears. The protagonist opened the play with an emotive soliloquy lamenting the death of his father, whose face he then mysteriously eats. The significance of this is unclear, although it may relate to the

portrayal of Hamlet as an *apapapita*, who while eating concealed himself from other people and willed the death of a bishop (here, Claudius). More likely, it was just a wacky effect to add to the supposed edginess of the production. Hamlet, a sympathetic figure as he quickly falls into madness, is warped with thoughts of vengeance for his father's murder. The music and lighting contributed greatly to the tension, whilst the minimalist staging (something which Aramburo said is typically Bolivian: no backdrop and a row of thin cotton sheets on either side of the stage) forced the audience to pay full attention to the acting. But all suspense and emotion were shattered when the famous and highly ironic poisoning scene was portrayed as a *choli*ta wrestling match, enacted by two male actors crudely dressed as Bolivia's famous female wrestlers. This scene was certainly for the benefit of the theatre company – which is known for its lighthearted comedy – and was met with considerable laughter, although that too was arguably offensive to both women and *cholis*tas, and it undoubtedly undermined the most dramatically ironic scene of the entire play. The way in which Aramburo attempted to make Hamlet Bolivian was by including dialogue in *Aymara* – although that, too, was offensive, as Hamlet was seen roaming around the stage, spitting sweets from his mouth, half-naked and certainly mad. The audience (comprised of La Paz's pale middle class, with nary a *pollera* in sight) thought this hilarious. However, the link between the indigenous people's language and Hamlet's rapidly decreasing mental stability was at best some-

what questionable. A more successful Spanish reference was that of the *Día de Todos los Santos*, a day on which an offering is made to the dead; this reference was muttered acerbically by Hamlet as he left the stage, rooting the play in a much-desired South American context and also portraying Hamlet's bitterness as well as his obligation to avenge his father's murder.

The portrayal of Hamlet as an *apapapita* was not at all obvious from the performance, and only hinted at when the protagonist had a table strapped to his back, which he hauled around the stage, symbolic of the burden of vengeance he now carried; the constant references to alcohol also implied this interpretation, but that greatly undermined Hamlet's madness. This inebriation may also account for the bizarre inclusion of water throughout the performance (at one point in the play, water poured from the table, and Ophelia was constantly pouring water over herself). It is a shame that the production did not make its interpretation more clear, as its symbolic significance could have been an interesting South American twist on an Elizabethan English classic. But the audience wasn't privy to the company's intent, and instead, the production sat on the fence and tried to squeeze Shakespeare's longest play into 90 minutes, attempting to be both funny (in the most bizarre and often offensive ways) and tragic, but finally only being cryptic and opaque. If only the Teatro de los Andes had fully addressed our Prince's famous question and arrived at a convincing, entertaining and comprehensible answer.



**Bolivian** Express  
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# Cultural Calendar

Cultural Calendar April 2012

**PROSPECTIVE PROGRAMME AT EL DESNIVEL THEATRE  
DA VINCI BUILDING, AV. SANCHEZ LIMA 2282**

**APRIL  
MÁTAME, POR FAVOR**

Kill Me, Please

**Starring Cristian Mercado, Patricia García, Anuar Elías, Rodrigo Reyes Ríos and Diego Toledo**  
**Dates: 7,8 / 14,15 / 21, 22 / 28, 29 Saturdays and Sundays, 20:00**

One morning, a young bourgeoisie man wakes to find his neighbour (who appears to have been raped), her husband (brutally beaten up), and two unknown men inside their house. The latter introduce themselves as undercover agents. Why are they there? Nobody knows. A house arrest? Perhaps. Are they hit men? Is it a strange job interview? Are they simply delinquents? Perhaps. The bourgeoisie man finds himself cornered in a terrible, indescribable situation. Actions and words are saturated with violence. The pace accelerates... until it reaches breaking point.

**MAY  
SMELL (YO NO SOY ESE TIPO DE GENTE )**

Smell (I am not that Kind of Person)

**Starring Patricia García, Bernardo Arancibia, Antonio Peredo, Denisse Arancibia and Rodrigo Reyes Ríos**  
**Dates: 12, 13 / 19, 20 / 26, 27 Saturdays and Sundays, 20:00**

Roy and Matías are a part of a theatre group; they love and believe in theatre, and want to stage a play. But they don't really understand what theatre is about. A director and his pregnant wife, (a stage actress) want to reignite the flame of their dying relationship and go looking for new experiences. But they are not that kind of people. An art student has to turn to the art of prostitution to survive. He finds himself dealing with women, men, and couples alike. But, he is not gay, or in other words he is not a queer. Or in other words he's not a fairy, poofter, bumder, or queen. None of these are ideal situations. The only thing that they have in common is that none appeal. They stink.

**JUNE  
BUENAS INFLUENCIAS, BONITOS CADÁVERES**

Good Influences, Pretty Corpses

**Dates: 9, 10 / 16, 17 / 23, 24 Saturdays and Sundays, 20:00**

Two women meet before they board flight 163, flying to Buenos Aires and Miami. The first of the two women (Berta) dreams of leaving the country, she wants to live abroad. She needs friends -a life... she needs someone to remember her. Pet doesn't want anything new, she doesn't need anyone new, in spite of the fact that Berta and a euphoric farewell entourage (who are at the airport) assure her it would be best to buy a cheap flight and leave the country. The events succeeding this encounter cause the women to influence each other to such an extent that they confuse their personalities and dreams. Time becomes twisted... the two paths cross, crash, are taken to pieces, reinvented and confused excessively.

**JULY  
DI COSAS COSAS BIEN (OH MY COUNTRY IS TRÈS JOLIE!)**

Say Things Well (Oh My Country is Very Beautiful!)

**Starring Patricia García, Cristian Mercado, Mariana Vargas and Bernardo Arancibia**  
**Dates: 7, 8 / 14, 15 / 21, 22**

Felipe needs work, he needs to be successful, he needs someone to tell him that he could be important. Alicia doesn't remember her own name, she tosses and turns and lives in her own filth, waiting for Felipe, who has left in search of work. Various characters take advantage of the confusion that arises. Di Cosas Bien... is about our abuse of words, our abuse of stereotypes, and our need to validate ourselves. Playing with spaces, objects, and shapes... exploring the right way of existing in the world. Speeches with words that are used to classify, label, and give power.



# MATAME POR FAVOR

TEXT: LAUREN BELL

★★★★☆  
4 out of 5 stars



The FITAZ festival went off with a bang on its first weekend with performances of *Mátame, Por Favor* on the nights of Saturday 24 and Sunday 25 March in the Espacio el Desnivel theatre space. It was performed by Escena 163, an artistic collective created in 2004 that is known nationally for writing and performing its own theatrical pieces. *Mátame, Por Favor* was written and directed by the Bolivian playwright and co-founder of Escena 163, Eduardo Calla, an all-rounded artist with complementary experience in acting who this year celebrates his 14th year in theatre.

The entire play is set in the room of a 'good guy' who has been taken hostage by two unknown men, and who - from the opening - can be seen tied to a chair facing his neighbours, whom he is forced to watch being tortured. By her dishevelled appearance and terrified expressions, the neighbour woman appears to have been raped. Her husband, with his body covered in bruises, appears to have been violently beaten up. The two antagonists, who are introduced as undercover agents of some type, have unclear motives as to their actions. There is a hint of

mystery throughout the entire performance, heightened by the non-specific roles of the performers and powerful, unpredictable and ultimately deafening music.

The small but impressive cast are key in creating an atmosphere in which the audience engages with the different characters and finds themselves, literally, on the edge of their seats throughout the entire performance. Christian Mercado stands out, giving an excellent performance as the head kidnapper and delivering a heart-wrenching monologue whilst demonstrating a sort of evil intelligence and wickedness to his character that holds the dramatic tension of the play. His accomplice, played by Anuar Elías, is perfect for the role of Manuel with his freakish appearance, jittery actions and hilarious tone of voice for the few volatile words he is given. Elías sets the scene early, poised to one side of the stage, looking nervous and apprehensive as the audience is seated. Diego Toledo, playing the 'good guy' victim, has few lines, but he uses his facial expressions and silent mien to convey a frightened, wounded presence. Finally, the neighbours, played by Patricia García and Rodrigo Reyes Ríos: García's presence is fundamental in conveying her

character's trauma, with her incessant shouting, crying, and screaming until the audience shares her angst. During the more intense moments of the performance she wails loudly, and other times is completely silent as her kidnapper reads a novel, thereby contributing to the ambiguous ambience of the play.

Eduardo Calla describes his play as a complicated black comedy, risky and very critical of our society. What I enjoyed most was how it effectively conveyed the emotions of fear and terror whilst still fulfilling its comedic nature, mainly through the use of the character of Manuel, as well as the almost-out-of-place but effective choice of music. It is a performance full of extremes and contrasts: violence, humour, fear, jokes, and outrage. Above all, it is a drama in which the audience plays an active role fuelled by trauma along with the mysterious nature of the play, which provokes a questioning attitude amongst viewers. Through his own text, Calla gutsily gives a representation of society that isn't all too glamorous, exhibiting the despair, humiliation, and brutality of a not-so-perfect world. Overall, it is a well-executed play with excellent use of music, lighting, and minimalist staging.

# LOS B

TEXT: HELENA CAVELL

★★★★☆ 4 out of 5 stars



L

os B gathers some of Bolivia's most talented actors and throws them together in a script that gives a face to Bolivia's bourgeois of the 1980s. Based on

Thomas Mann's novel *Buddenbrooks*, the play tells a story familiar to modern Bolivia: a once wealthy family, whose fortunes are in decline, in a decade of political, economic and social turmoil. During a family gathering, the characters grapple with death and financial instability, and the changes these bring to their roles in the household. The group left at the end of the play is very different to the family we began with.

The play makes excellent use of the Centro Sinfónico Nacional; set in a basement room of the building, the audience are invited to sit around the scenery, creating an intimate environment that suits the play perfectly. Close proximity to the actors allows

every detail of their performance to be scrutinised, and the actors of *Los B* do not disappoint. Alejandro Viviani's Christian is particularly noteworthy; where others may have neglected to recognise more than a clichéd, clownish figure, Viviani brings comic relief, emotional intensity and sensitivity to the play. However, while personal opinion draws me to his performance, all seven actors shine equally. The beauty of the play is that it allows the audience to choose which cast member to identify with; arguably you need to watch the play seven times, each time focusing on a different performer. It is a credit to the actors' skill that none of them protrude as the protagonist: aspirations to individual stardom are set aside in favour of a cohesive effort for a star ensemble performance.

The play's direction is similarly outstanding. Percy Jimenez, writer and director of the work, leads us through a plethora of sentiments us-

ing simple yet effective tools. Barely noticeable details, such as the faint noise of a piano recital upstairs, or a piercing whistle in moments of intensity, guide the audience to the intended emotion. It is a perfect lesson on the effectiveness of subtlety.

The script, however, does feel like it is lacking one vital ingredient. The successful strategy in Jimenez's direction – doing so much with little – has not been employed in his script writing. In attempting to address too many issues, it leaves us with too little information. Although enjoyable, it is difficult to define what the work wants to accomplish: ridiculing melodramatic women, exposing the dangers of pushy parents, satire bounds in all directions, and thereby leads us nowhere in particular. In this was the disappointment, yet, it is hard to be negative about a play with such talent on show. *Los B* is clever, provocative and while not perfect, a pleasure to view.



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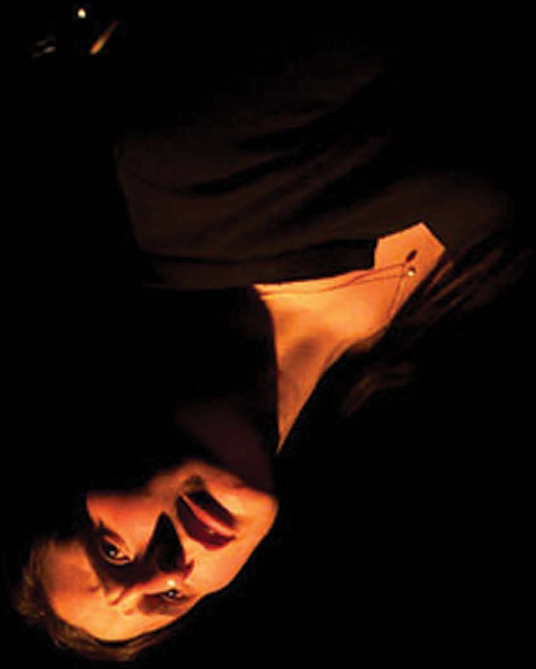


Photo by Christian Calderón